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THE FIRST NATIONAL NOMINATING CONVENTION

THE Anti-masonic convention which met in Baltimore in 1831 has been commonly set down as the first national nominating convention. Yet there seems sufficient reason for the assertion that the conference of Federalists, which in September, 1812, nominated DeWitt Clinton for the presidency, presents many if not all of the characteristics of a national nominating convention. Very little has been written about this conference, most writers passing it over with the briefest mention. Viewed with relation to practical results it was of slight consequence, and for this reason it has been neglected, but as a step in the development of the present method of bringing forward candidates for the presidency the Federalist conference of 1812 is of much importance.

Mr. Madison's war policy made him unpopular with a portion of the Republican party, and especially with the New York Republicans. He was nominated without open opposition by a congressional caucus, but the Republican members of the New York legislature determined to defeat the election if possible. To this end a caucus of the Republican members of the legislature nominated DeWitt Clinton. As a sort of apology for this unusual method of nomination the committee of correspondence, which was appointed in New York to further Mr. Clinton's interests, in urging the co-operation of the other states pointed out the grave dangers attending caucus nominations at the seat of the national government.

The Federalists were opposed to the war, but despairing of defeating Madison with a man distinctively of their own party determined, at the conference which is the subject of this paper, to support Clinton, who was opposed to the war as conducted by Madison. The Federalists resolved that the latter must by all means be defeated. Clinton, although previously nominated by the New York Republicans, came more and more, as the campaign wore on, to be regarded as the Federalist candidate. The presidential contest developed into a contest between the war and peace parties, and Clinton became identified with the latter to his own detriment politically, for with the campaign of 1812 he passed out of importance in national politics.

So far as is known no report of the proceedings of this conference was ever printed, and the newspapers of the period, which have been carefully searched for the purpose, contain very little trustworthy information regarding it. The proceedings were conducted as privately as possible, so that what little news the papers contain relative to the conference is more or less conjectural. Enough is known from other sources, however, for the purpose of this paper, which is to establish its characteristics as a national nominating convention.

The most important statement regarding the matter is that made by one of the delegates, William Sullivan, of Massachusetts. In his *Familiar Letters* (1834) he gives a brief account of the conference. In the subsequent edition of that book (*Public Men of the Revolution*, 1847) appears for the first time, in a footnote¹ inserted by his son, John T. S. Sullivan, William Sullivan's account of the origin of the conference, related by his son *memoriter*. "Soon after the war had been declared," he said, "I chanced to be at Saratoga Springs, where I met with the Hon. Calvin Goddard, of Norwich, Ct., and with Hon. Jon. Dwight, of Springfield, Mass. Gov. Griswold, of Connecticut, was also at the hotel, but confined to his chamber. It was the habit of these two gentlemen and myself, to pay the Governor a daily visit, and when he announced himself too ill to receive us, we strolled into the neighboring woods, to talk over the state of the Union, respecting the welfare and durability of which, we entertained serious and painful fears. On one of these excursions, it was concluded, that a convention should be convened at New York during the following September at which as many states should be represented as could be induced to send delegates. . . . The convention met at New York, in September, and eleven states were represented by seventy delegates. The convention, during two days, had been unable to come to any determination, and on the third day were about dissolving without any fixed plan of operation. Hon. Rufus King had pronounced the most impassioned invective against Clinton, and was so excited during his address, that his knees trembled under him.² Gouverneur Morris doubted much the expediency of the measure, and was seconded in these doubts by Theo. Sedgwick as well as by Judge Hopkinson. . . . It was approaching the hour and nothing had been de-

¹ Pp. 350, 351.

² Rufus King attended the conference reluctantly. The fourth volume of his *Writings*, to appear shortly, will contain some hitherto unpublished letters respecting his action. — *Letter of Dr. Charles R. King*.

terminated, when Mr. Otis arose, apparently much embarrassed, holding his hat in his hand, and seeming as if he were almost sorry he had arisen. Soon he warmed with his subject, his hat fell from his hand, and he poured forth a strain of eloquence that chained all present to their seats, and when at a late hour, the vote was taken it was almost unanimously resolved to support Clinton."

Comparing now the conference thus described with the present nominating convention, let us see what reasons there are for believing it to have been the first national nominating convention.

In the nominating convention of to-day all the states are represented by delegates elected by their party in their respective states. At the convention in question eleven states were represented by seventy delegates. Nearly every state in which the Federalists were strong enough to make their vote a factor in the election sent delegates, and all the states were asked to send them, so that so far as the party was concerned the Federalists may be said to have had a national representation at the conference. As to the method by which the delegates were chosen the records are too incomplete to admit of the assertion that they were in all instances duly elected. That they were elected in New York seems evident from letters of John Jay and Gouverneur Morris on the subject of the convention. Morris's letter to Jay, printed with the date September 11, 1812 (probably it should be August 11), implies that the delegates from New York were to be chosen by a state convention, the members of which had been chosen by the party in the counties. From Jay's reply it appears likely that the arrangements were to be made by the presidents of the state conventions.¹

To the convention at New York, Vermont sent two delegates, New Hampshire two, Massachusetts eight, Rhode Island three, New York eighteen, Connecticut six, New Jersey twelve, Pennsylvania twelve, Delaware two, Maryland three, and South Carolina four. It will be seen that some of the smaller states sent more delegates than their larger sister states. Evidently no rules as to the number of delegates from each state were laid down by the party. At the election all the New England states with the exception of Vermont voted for Clinton. The votes of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Tennessee, and Louisiana, were likewise cast for him, making eighty-nine in all. Madison's majority was only eighteen votes in the electoral colleges.

The analogy between this conference and the present national

¹ Jay's *Works*, IV. 362, 363; Sparks's *Morris*, III. 274.

nominating convention is then practically complete. Delegates of a distinctive political party, elected in some instances, perhaps in all, by their party in their respective states, met for the purpose of nominating a candidate for the presidency. They nominated such a candidate; their party conducted a "campaign" in his behalf and cast their votes for him at the election. The facts concerning this conference seem sufficient to warrant the assertion that this was the first national nominating convention.

The *National Intelligencer* made the following statement of the proceedings: ". . . we now learn that the resolutions of most importance were: First, that under the present circumstances it would be unwise to take up a man notoriously of their own party. Second, that they would support the candidate of the two already mentioned whose success would best promote the object of their party. Third, that they would not now make a selection of either as their candidate. In the incidental discussion to which these points gave occasion, Messrs. Otis, Gouverneur Morris, and we believe R. Goodloe Harper gave a decided preference to Mr. Clinton; and a meeting between this gentleman and certain members of the caucus, of whom Gouverneur Morris was one, was had; and in this meeting Mr. Clinton declared that all political connections between himself and the Democratic party in the United States had ceased and would not be renewed." This piece of news called forth an open letter from Mr. Otis in which he declared that the account of the proceedings was false and that no communication had been held with Mr. Clinton nor had he made any statement to the convention.

JOHN S. MURDOCK.